

REPORT ON A VISIT TO VIENNA

1. THE GENERAL POSITION

It was just over a year since I had been in Vienna; and the destruction of the Jewish community during that year has been carried through with inconceivable thoroughness. Last year the policy was described as one of systematic economic destruction and systematic maintenance of panic. The aim which has been remorselessly pursued is to make life literally unendurable, and so force the people out - anyhow.

The figures of the Jewish population speak for themselves. In April 1933 the population of "Confessional" Jews was 165,000; it was in the middle of this August, 67,000. In April 1938 the population in the Provinces was 15,000; it is now 370. In the province of Niederdonau, where last year there were over 8,000, there are today 270; in the Burgenland, where Jews had been settled for centuries on the land, there were 3,500 and now - 5. It is estimated that the exodus accounts for more than 110,000; and during the year 3,500 have died. The death rate is four times what it was in 1937; and of the death-rate one eighth part is due to suicide.

The livelihood of almost all the Jews has been taken away. Every single Jewish shop or business has been "aryanized", destroyed or shut. You no longer see the sign "Arisch" on any business place, because it is superfluous. A very few of the Jewish medical doctors are allowed to practice amongst Jews; and a smaller number of Jewish lawyers are allowed to be "consultants for Jewish clients". About 1500 men are employed in Government industries or private industries, where there is a shortage of labour; while a few score Jews known as 'economically worthy' are kept precariously as agents and travellers for businesses which have connections abroad. Between 3-4000 young men and women are training for manual employment, either in gardens or in workshops which belonged to Jews, have been taken over by Nazi administrators, and are leased to the Jewish Community or to their former owners for training purposes, subject to the payment of special taxes. About a thousand more of the young persons are training for agriculture on a score of farms in the Provinces which have been obtained in similar terms. For the rest, the only work is the organisation of the community for emigration.

Movable private property of value, such as gold and silver objects, has been taken away, and any form of private wealth confiscated or blocked. All the Jews who live outside what was the Jewish quarter in the Leopoldstadt are being expelled from their houses or apartments - even when they are the owners. The purpose is to force the remaining population into a congested ghetto. It is a pathetic contrast that in the offices of the Israelitische Kultusgemeinde in the old Jewry,

one of the doors bears an inscription "Arisch". It is the door of a flat, of which the tenant is a Christian, who has chosen to remain, and may not be dislodged. It is another example of German thoroughness that every Jew has had to add to his name "Israel" and every Jewess "Sarah". Some 70,000 registrations of change of name have accordingly been carried out by the community.

The poverty and destitution of the remnant of a great community are heartrending. Well over half of the 67,000 are fed daily through communal soup-kitchens, most of them collecting for their family their one square meal of the day from the kitchens. They have no meat; and a large number are glaringly undernourished. Some thousands more of the old, infirm and children, are maintained by the community in such charitable buildings as remain to it - all of them sadly bare and gaunt. The hapless people cannot even enjoy God's air; it is an offence for them to enter a public park or garden, or to sit on a bench in the Ring. One small park near the Jewish quarter was reserved for them, but it is not safe to enter it. They cannot use any bathing place, nor go to any form of entertainment; not even attend a Synagogue. Every one of the Jewish places of worship in Vienna has been destroyed or closed, except the oldest in the community centre, and that may not be used for religious service but is part of the offices. The cemetery has not been inviolate; the hall where the burial ceremony is read has been blown to pieces. Their libraries, which had famous collections have been seized and confiscated. The principal religious school was burned down. Hitherto the Vienna Gemeinde has maintained special elementary schools for Jewish children, but it is uncertain whether they will be reopened after the holidays. If Jews listen-in to the wireless, they must hear daily accounts of Jewish misdeeds or action taken against Jews somewhere in the world. They are allowed to have one newspaper, which is subject to severe censorship, and contains principally articles about possibilities of emigration.

The one hope for all, young and older, is emigration; and the main interest is preparation for emigration. During the year nearly 40,000 have passed through classes of training and retraining, which embrace a thousand different branches of manual or domestic work. There is a class, for example, for bar-mixers, and several for butlers, which are attended by lawyers, doctors and industrialists. The possibility of domestic service in England has been a Godsend. Thousands of children and adults are learning English somehow, for there is scarcely a family which has not a relation in Great Britain or the United States.

The work of emigration is organised, with remarkable thoroughness and devotion, by the "Kultusgemeinde" for the full-Jews, and by the "Society of Friends" for the half-Jews. The Jewish Communal offices in the Seitenstettengasse are a curious rabbit-warren; but the elaborate procedure which requires reference to a score of Government offices and the filling in of scores of forms is carried through methodically and expeditiously. It is a tribute to the Vienna spirit that punctuality and politeness are maintained. The Government have established a central office for Jewish emigration (which comprises also the non-Aryan Christians) in the former Rothschild Palace. There the penultimate stage of the procedure is enacted: the passports are given: the certificates of 'no objection' are obtained. Finally the emigrant comes back to the Communal Office to get the means for his ticket and the landing money for his destination. The only foreign exchange which he can obtain is that put at the disposal of the community by outside refugee organisations, which is completely reserved for the purpose. In return for

his last Marks he obtains the necessary dollars or pounds: if he has none, he receives an advance from the community.

That part of the emigration at least has some order and planning. It moves to the U.S.A., Australia, South America, Palestine, and most of all to England, which is the principal country of temporary asylum. But there is another and more hopeless emigration for those who are expelled at the shortest notice on penalty of being thrown back into a concentration camp. These comprise men who are stateless or were foreign subjects before - Poles and the like. Driven from their homes - even from the hospitals, - they are forced over the frontier anyhow, usually without visas. Some thousands have gone to Shanghai, others to the No-man's-Land on the Polish frontier, others to ships which hopelessly seek to land their passengers at a port of asylum. Some weeks ago there was a tiny ray of hope in the darkness, when it was reported that the Italian Government was prepared to let persons enter as tourists, if they could produce some modest amount of foreign currency. A thousand or two were encouraged by the authorities to take the chance, and were admitted. Suddenly the Italian Government repudiated the policy, thrust many of the people back, and arrested the members of the refugee committees.

II. THE EMIGRATION POLICY.

It is the set policy of the authorities in Vienna to eliminate the Jewish population by the end of the year, or the beginning of 1940. So far they have succeeded with the plan of forced emigration at a rate of 7-8000 monthly. And they intend to continue the pressure. They prefer a disorderly to a planned emigration, as a means of making trouble for the Jews in other countries. They require the Kultusgemeinde to give them a statement every 10 days, showing the reduction of the population and the number who have emigrated, and their destinations. They systematically foster illegal transports to Palestine, and for this purpose do provide a certain amount of Marks from the confiscated Jewish property.

The official who is now in charge of the Zentralstelle for Jewish emigration (which includes non-Aryan Emigration) is the Hauptmann Eichmann who has been directing that work since the beginning. He has also been put in charge of the Jewish emigration from the Protectorate (Bohemia and Moravia). I went to see him with Dr. Löwenherz; I told him that the Council for German Jewry was unable to continue to provide the funds for the assistance of the Kultusgemeinde in the same measure as had been done during the last 8 months; and that we were unwilling to help with the carrying out of a policy which was only multiplying the problems of other countries, to which the refugees were forced out. We had those problems now in Belgium, Holland, Shanghai, as well as the problem of illegal transportation to Palestine of people who could not be landed. We could only give help provided there was an ordered emigration, which must be carried out over a longer period. The Inter-Governmental Committee had been assured by Dr. Wohltat that the German Government would co-operate in an ordered emigration, and it was on that condition that the other Governments were asked to help. That policy of ordered emigration must be applied to the Ostmark as well as the other parts of the Reich.

Herr Eichmann said he appreciated the position of the organisations, but there were special circumstances in the Ostmark. Orders had been given in the highest quarters that the complete evacuation of the Jews must be carried out in the shortest time, and the statement about ordered emigration did not apply there. He could not make any change in the program. Of the 67,000 Jews who remained, it was proposed that 20-25,000 might stay, they were:-

- (a) old people above the age of 65 who could not be emigrated.
- (b) pensioners of the Government or the municipality.
- (c) very poor persons.

About 45,000 must be cleared out in the next 6 months. Those who remained would be supported by the proceeds of the Jewish endowments, estimated at six million marks, the money obtained from confiscated Jewish property, and the proceeds of passport fees from the emigrants, which amounted already to 1½ million reichsmarks. I pointed out that the proceeds of Jewish endowments in the Ostmark should be used now for the relief of the destitute in the country, in the same way as was done with the proceeds of the endowments in the Altreich. The organisations were unable to provide the large sums which the Kultusgemeinde required for feeding the greater part of the Jews remaining in Vienna, and for other forms of social work. He said he would consider the matter. But I was informed before I left Vienna, by Dr. Löwenherz, that he did not believe there would be any change. There will not be any modification of the present ruthless policy in Vienna, unless some strong influence is brought to bear in Berlin, and definite instructions are given from Berlin. That can only be done through the Inter-Governmental Committee.

It is urgent to take some steps to this end, because even during the few days I was in Vienna, the position about emigration seriously deteriorated. The announcement was made about the closing of Shanghai, to which town, during the last year, thousands had been sent from Austria. The total number shown as emigrated to 'Asia', apart from Palestine, during the year, is 17,727, but I understand that a considerable portion of those so shown, went on the illegal transports for Palestine.

Italy also, to which there had been an ill-considered tourist emigration during the previous months, was absolutely closed, and a number who had been sent there were thrown back. The possibilities for legal emigration that exist, judging by the experience of the last year are (a) the United States of America, about 1,000 a month, which is the number of visas being granted now by the American Consulate: (b) England, 1,000 a month, divided between women for domestic employment, private guarantees, children and the Camp - though both the last categories are now nearly filled: (c) South America, Australia and other overseas countries, 700 a month: (d) Palestine, 500 a month, and (e) the continental countries, 500 a month. That would give a maximum emigration of all kinds of 3,700 a month, which is a little more than half the present exodus. And it would mean that the Jewish population, apart from those who would be allowed to remain, would be cleared out of Vienna in a year. If the emigration were regulated on this basis, it would be possible to find a means of legal entry. And the amount which would be required from the outside organisations for the assistance of the emigration could be reduced; although it would still have to be a very substantial sum.

The total monthly expenditure of the Kultusgemeinde, for feeding, social help, retraining, and emigration together, cannot be reduced below RM. 1,250,000. I think only a quarter of that sum can be raised locally, by taxation; but it may be possible, by the efforts of the Inter-Governmental Committee, to get a contribution from the proceeds of the Jewish endowments and confiscated property. But the rest will have to come from the outside organisations; and the foreign exchange, so provided, will be required in order to enable the legal emigration, particularly to the countries of South America and Australia, to continue.

Unless some change is brought about, there is bound to be a multiplication of catastrophes such as those now taking place in Italy, the No-man's-Land and the refugee ships, which cannot land their passengers. It should be possible to secure a minimum of decency in the policy of the elimination of the Jews, if there is any sincerity at all in the statements made by Dr. Wohltat.

I saw the American Consul-General, Mr. Morris, and discussed the position with him. He told me that he had not realised altogether the extreme pressure that was being used to force out the Jewish population, nor the quantity of the emigration. He was prepared to send a report on the matter to the Department of State as soon as he received the necessary material.

17th August, 1939.

N. B.

Council for German Jewry: Norman Bentwich Report. 17 Aug. 1939.
TS Archives of the Central British Fund for World Jewish Relief,
1933-1960 25.